



General Washington's Headquarters

This is Thomas Fleming, author of *Washington's Secret War: The Hidden History of Valley Forge*.

"Naked and starving as they are, we cannot admire the incomparable patience and fidelity of the soldiery." General George Washington wrote these heartbreaking words at his headquarters at Valley Forge. They record our most familiar image of the Continental Army in this winter camp, but those words tell us only small part of the drama of Valley Forge. General Washington did far more than express his sympathy for the soldiers hardships. He took on critics in the Continental Congress and the Army who were blaming him for the soldiers plight. He fought a secret war with them to rescue his reputation and prevent the army's total collapse.

Congressman James Lovell of Massachusetts wrote to Samuel Adams that he had "little to say about our Grand Army. Tis a subject very sickening to even a strong stomach." When congress sent a five man committee to Valley Forge to investigate the army's situation, Lovell predicted they would "rap a demigod over the knuckles".

Congressman Abraham Clark of New Jersey was another nasty critic. "We may talk of the enemies cruelty as we will" he sneered, "but we have no greater cruelty to complain of than the management of our army."

At the bar of a local tavern, Brigadier General Thomas Conway called Washington an old woman. Another savage critic was General Thomas Mifflin the army's Quartermaster General. He claimed Washington's pretensions of being a great man made it impossible to work with him. Mifflin quit his job without bothering to tell Washington. The resulting chaos in the Quartermaster Department had not a little to do with the food shortages at Valley Forge.

Washington's abusers assumed he would consider it beneath his dignity to answer these smears and slanders. They expected a humiliated Washington to resign his commission and go home to Mount Vernon. Instead, Washington stunned his opponents by fighting back. When one of his friends reported an especially insulting comment on Washington's generalship that Thomas Conway had sent to General Horatio Gates, Washington wrote Conway a blunt letter asking if it were true. That threw his military critics into a panic.

Next, Washington formed a political alliance with Henry Laurens of South Carolina, the president of Congress. That helped him deal with his congressional critics. When the five man committee arrived at Valley Forge, Washington presented them with a massival report on the army's problems. Overnight it turned the politicians into Washington's allies.

In little more than two months, General Washington had his critics on the run. Congressmen rushed to assure their constituents that they had never harbored a negative opinion about that

great and good man George Washington. They approved his choice for a new Quartermaster General who soon had the army eating well.

This emergence of Washington as a tough, shrewd politician is one of the most important and least appreciated stories of Valley Forge.